SafeRoutes
National Center for Safe Routes to School

**Safe Routes to School**
**Talking Points**

Talking points are an important tool that can be used to communicate a consistent message about Safe Routes to School programs. These talking points may be particularly useful for conversations and meetings with key stakeholders, such as parents and local officials, as well as interviews with the media.

The following information can help communicate important topics and concepts:

- What are Safe Routes to School programs?
- Key points regarding school travel trends, bicycle and pedestrian safety, physical activity and concern for the environment
- History of Safe Routes to School

## Defining and Developing Safe Routes to School

### What are Safe Routes to School Programs?

Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs are sustained efforts by parents, schools, community leaders and local, state, and federal governments to improve the health and well-being of children by enabling and encouraging them to walk and bicycle to school.

SRTS programs examine conditions around schools and conduct projects and activities that improve safety and reduce traffic and air pollution in the vicinity of schools. As a result, these programs make bicycling and walking to school a safer and more appealing transportation choice, thus encouraging a healthy and active lifestyle from an early age.

### Why is a program like Safe Routes to School needed?

Many communities struggle with a lack of safe places to walk and bicycle, congested roads, poor air quality, and few available options for physical activity for children. When appropriate and safe, walking and bicycling to school is an experience that can help children develop a sense of independence and confidence in their abilities.

In addition to improving safety for children, Safe Routes to School programs can benefit a community's quality of life by reducing traffic congestion and motor vehicle emissions while increasing opportunities to be more physically active and connect with neighbors. As a result, SRTS programs can improve safety for all pedestrians and bicyclists in the community.

### How does a school start a Safe Routes to School Program?

Each school and community starts their SRTS program with different circumstances. For example, some schools have great places for walking and bicycling but few students that

take advantage of them. Other communities have children who walk and bicycle to school in unsafe conditions or along poorly maintained routes. Some communities do not have children walking or bicycling to school at all. Each situation presents an opportunity to improve the walking and bicycling conditions for students traveling to school.

Successful Safe Routes to School programs involve the whole community. Parents, children, neighborhood groups, schools, law enforcement officers, community leaders and transportation and public health professionals can help identify the issues and develop solutions.

While each situation is unique, the basic steps to starting a Safe Routes to School program include:

1. **Bring together the right people:** Identify people who want to make walking and bicycling to school safe and appealing for children. Sharing concerns, interests and knowledge among a variety of community members with diverse expertise can enable groups to tackle many different issues.
2. **Hold a kick-off meeting:** The kick-off meeting has two main goals - to create a vision and generate next steps.
3. **Gather information and identify issues:** Collecting information can help to identify needed program elements and provide a means to measure the impact of the program later.
4. **Identify solutions:** Solutions to issues identified by the group will include a combination of education, encouragement, engineering and enforcement strategies.
5. **Make a plan:** The SRTS plan does not need to be lengthy but should include education, encouragement, engineering and enforcement strategies, a time schedule, a map of the area covered by the plan and an explanation of how the program will be evaluated.
6. **Get the plan and people moving:** There are things that can be done right away without major funding, so some parts of the SRTS plan can begin while waiting on other parts.
7. **Evaluate, adjust and keep going:** After the program begins, careful monitoring will identify which strategies work well and which are not going as planned.

**What types of activities are typically a part of Safe Routes to School programs?**

Successful Safe Routes programs may include policy development, planning and implementation of strategies such as improvements to streets and sidewalks, education and encouragement of children and parents, and increased enforcement of traffic laws. Programs can include:

- Walkability and bikeability audits of the safety of streets around schools
- Strategies to improve sidewalk conditions near schools
- Use of traffic calming devices to slow traffic and give pedestrians priority
- Educating children on walking and bicycling safely, and challenging them to walk or bicycle often
- Implementing Walking School Buses, in which one or two parents or volunteers escort a group of children on the walk to school
- Increasing traffic enforcement around schools
- School official, law enforcement, engineer and transportation planner cooperation.

## How many kids walk or bicycle to school?

Fewer children walk or bicycle to school than did so a generation ago:

- In 1969, 48 percent of students between the ages of 5 and 14 walked or bicycled to or from school.[1]
- In 2009, 13 percent of students between the ages of 5 and 14 walked or bicycled to or from school.[1]
- In 1969, 89 percent of students in grades K through eight who lived within one mile of school usually walked or bicycled to school.[2]
- In 2009, only 35 percent of students in grades K through eight who lived within one mile of school usually walked or bicycled to school even once a week.[1]

This is an opportunity lost. Walking or bicycling to school gives children time for physical activity and a sense of responsibility and independence; allows them to enjoy being outside; and provides them with time to socialize with their parents and friends and to get to know their neighborhoods.

In 2009, school travel by private family vehicle for students in grades K through 12 accounted for 10 to 14 percent of all automobile trips made during the morning peak travel and two to three percent of the total annual trips made by family vehicle in the United States.[1]

Among parents who drove their children to school, approximately 40 percent returned home immediately after dropping their children at school.[1] If more children walked or bicycled to school, it would reduce the number of cars near the school at pick-up and drop-off times, making it safer for walkers and bicyclists through reduced traffic congestion and improved air quality.

## Why have we seen a decrease in children walking and bicycling to school?

The circumstances that have led to a decline in walking and bicycling to school did not happen overnight and have created a self-perpetuating cycle. As motor vehicle traffic increases, parents become convinced that it is unsafe for their children to walk or bicycle to school. As concerns about walking and bicycling safety elevate, many parents choose to drive their child to school. When parents drive their child to school they add even more traffic to the road and sustain the cycle. Understanding the many reasons why so many children do not walk or bicycle to school is the first step in interrupting the cycle.

Many factors contribute to the reduction in children walking and bicycling to school. The National Center for Safe Routes to School reviewed over 100,000 parent surveys collected from schools around the United States. The surveys identified barriers that prevent parents from allowing their children to walk or bicycle to school.

Parents cited one or more of the following eight barriers most often.[3]

| Issue | Percent of parents who cited issue as a reason for not allowing child to walk or bicycle to/from school |
|---|---|
| Distance to school | 62 % |
| Traffic speed | 55 % |
| Traffic volume | 55% |
| Intersection and crossing safety | 47% |
| Weather | 44 % |
| Crime danger | 38 % |
| Sidewalks | 33 % |
| Time | 24 % |

**How have the size and location of schools affected the distance to school?**

Over the past few decades, many school districts have moved away from smaller, centrally located schools and have instead built schools on the edge of communities where land costs are lower and acreage has been more available. As a result, the percentage of students in grades K through 8 who live less than one mile from school has declined from 41 percent in 1969 to 31 percent in 2009.[1,2]

## Pedestrian and Bicyclist Safety

Walking and bicycling need to be safe transportation options, which means creating safe environments and teaching safety skills to walkers, bicyclists and drivers.

**What do safe walking and bicycling environments include?**

- Neighborhood schools that are within walking and bicycling distance from homes
- Sidewalks or bicycle-paths that connect homes with schools
- Child-friendly opportunities to cross streets (such as the presence of adult crossing guards, raised medians, or traffic and pedestrian signals)
- Slow vehicle speeds and yielding to pedestrians and bicyclists, accomplished through roadway safety measures (traffic calming) and/or police enforcement
- Pathways that are accessible for students of all abilities

**Driver behaviors, like speeding and distracted driving, are key elements in safety. Attentive drivers traveling at slower speeds can save lives.**

- Speeding reduces a driver's peripheral vision, increases the distance needed to stop, and increases the severity of injury to a pedestrian in a crash.
- A car traveling 40 mph requires 300 feet, or an entire football field, to stop. At 30 mph a car needs 200 feet to stop and at 20 mph requires only 100 feet.[4]
- Higher speeds exponentially increase the chances that a driver will hit a pedestrian crossing or along the roadway and that the injuries sustained will be life changing (brain injury, physical impairment) or life ending.
- Distracted driving draws a driver's vision from the road, hands off the steering wheel, or mind off of the act of driving. Examples include talking or texting on the phone and eating while driving.
- Distracted driving increases the braking distance needed to safely avoid pedestrians and bicyclists. Multi-tasking while driving also slows cognitive ability, processing and reaction time.[5]

**Safety education includes working with:**

- Children - to provide them with basic safety education, such as how to cross streets, obey crossing guards and be visible to drivers.
- Parents - to create awareness of the need for pedestrian and bicyclist safety education, and the importance of practicing safety skills with their children.
- Drivers - to alert all drivers to the presence of walkers and bicyclists and the need to slow down.
- Law enforcement - to enhance pedestrian and bicyclist safety with school zone enforcement.
- Local officials - to identify changes needed to improve walking and bicycling conditions around schools.

**Teaching children walking and bicycling safety skills can help create lifelong traffic skills.**

- Short periods of skills-based training can significantly improve child pedestrian behavior.[6]
- Safety education activities should be scheduled for times when all students can participate.

## Physical Activity

There are many potential benefits of physical activity for youth including:[7,8,9]

- Weight control
- Reducing blood pressure
- Raising HDL ("good") cholesterol
- Improved cardiorespiratory endurance, muscular fitness and bone health
- Reduction in the risk of diabetes and some kinds of cancer
- Improved mental health

The walk to school can provide opportunities for physical activity, as well as time outdoors and near nature. Exposure to nature and free outdoor play can have additional health benefits including stress reduction, relief of ADHD symptoms in children and increased cognitive and motor functioning.[10,11,12,13]

## Environment and Air Quality

Vehicle emissions include air pollutants that affect the short-term and long-term health of individuals and communities. Air pollutants emitted by motor vehicles can be especially harmful to children because they breathe 50 percent more air per pound of body weight than adults and their respiratory systems are still developing.[14,16]

Motor vehicles emit air pollutants such as ozone, nitrogen oxides, carbon monoxide, particulate matter and volatile organic compounds. Exposure to these air pollutants can cause short-term health problems, such as headaches; nausea; skin and eye irritation; and nose, throat, and lung inflammation. These pollutants can also aggravate and intensify long-term respiratory and cardiovascular health problems, such as asthma and heart disease.[14]

- Air pollution has negative effects on lung development in children and can reduce lung function, increase respiratory infection, and aggravate asthma symptoms.[15]
- Childhood asthma is one of the most common pollution-related health problems in America, with more than 7 million children currently living with asthma.[16]
- At least 14 million school days are missed annually due to asthma**.**[16]

Schools placed in neighborhoods near residential areas with a good street and sidewalk network have more students arriving by bicycle and on foot. Air quality is measurably better at such locations.[17]

In addition to local air pollution, the transportation sector is responsible for one third of all carbon dioxide emissions in the US.[18] Passenger cars, trucks, motorcycles, and SUVs together account for 62 percent of transportation-related greenhouse gas emissions.[19]

Walking and bicycling to school provide opportunities for children and families to reduce their carbon usage and emissions, and contribute to the health of the environment.

- If a family chooses to walk to school (rather than drive a personal vehicle) they can reduce their carbon use by 0.164 metric tons annually. If half of the students at an average size elementary school choose to walk to school their impact could be a savings of over 39 tons of greenhouse gas emissions a year. This is the equivalent of the carbon-removing abilities of 1,000 trees.[20]
- Leaving the car at home just two days a week will reduce greenhouse gas emissions by an average of 1,600 pounds per year.[21]

## History of Safe Routes

### How did the Safe Routes to School concept start?

The term “Safe Routes to School” was first used in Denmark in the late 1970s as part of a very successful initiative to reduce the number of children killed while walking and bicycling to school. Safe Routes to School spread internationally, with programs throughout Europe and in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States.

The first modern Safe Routes to School program in the U.S. began in 1997 in the Bronx, NY. In 1998, Congress funded two pilot SRTS programs through the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). NHTSA issued $50,000 each for Safe Routes to School pilot programs in Marin County, California, and Arlington, Massachusetts. Within a year after the launch of the pilot programs, many other grassroots Safe Routes to School efforts began throughout the United States.

As word spread in the pedestrian and bicyclist community of success with the NHTSA pilot programs, interest in a broader program grew. In July 2005, Congress passed federal legislation that established a national Safe Routes to School program. The program, which was signed into law with the SAFETEA-LU transportation bill in August 2005, ultimately dedicated more than $1.1 billion towards SRTS from 2005 to 2012 (SAFETEA-LU was extended several times). These funds have been distributed to

states based on student enrollment, with no state receiving less than $1 million per year. SRTS funds must be used for both infrastructure projects, such as improvements to streets and sidewalks, and non-infrastructure activities like education and encouragement of children and parents. The legislation also required each state to have a Safe Routes to School Coordinator to serve as a central point of contact for the state.

The July 2012 passage of a new transportation bill, Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century (MAP-21), brought administrative and funding changes for the federal Safe Routes to School program. Under MAP-21, the SRTS Program became part of the Transportation Alternatives Program. At the federal and state levels, the way the program is administered and how states can choose to distribute funds is different than when the program was under SAFETEA-LU. Interim Guidance was released by FHWA in October 2012, with more guidance to follow. Current information on MAP-21 Transportation Alternatives Interim Guidance is available on the FHWA website at: www.fhwa.dot.gov/map21/guidance/guidetap.cfm.

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